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A COMMENT ON TUCKER'S TRIPWIRE

Malcolm W. Hoag

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A COMMENT ON TUCKER'S TRIPWIRE

As in 1975, I find myself agreeing with Robert R. Tucker about the need to buttress our "vital interests" in the Persian Gulf by creating credible military options there. But, also I find myself again at issue with him about the appropriate instrumentalities for military action in the Persian Gulf, if we are driven to drastic action. Then I put my views as follows:

But reflections about our reaction and that of others to the OPEC cartel suggest, however much it may be disbelieved by our critics abroad, that the United States now conspicuously lacks a *Realpolitik*, if ever it had one. It is not by accident or coincidence that it was one of the thoughtful neoisolationists, R. W. Tucker, who was the first to think loudly and reasonably in public about the unthinkable--military intervention to insure oil supply.

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To buttress economic countermeasures in dealing with OPEC, the OECD members may therefore need to reinvent--because it is by no means new, especially in the Middle East--the "inverted blockade in which the enemy was blockaded out of his country instead of into it."* Consider the invasion and occupation of a Persian Gulf country versus punitive blows from standoff distances at economic targets in that country. If we were to ask our military planners for high confidence in the success of invasion, the reply might well be that it cannot be guaranteed. But if a Persian Gulf government asked its defense planners for high confidence in warding off any punitive blows from external forces, theirs is the burden

* Sir John Slessor, *The Central Blue*, Cassell & Co., London, 1956, p. 62. Referring to its application in the area extending east of Palestine to the northwest frontier of India in the period between the World Wars, where continuous land occupation was manifestly infeasible, his term for the method is "air control." The official object of the method, as expressed in the R.A.F. War Manual, was "interrupting the normal life of the enemy people" (p. 54); and the means was precise bombing directed against economic targets that had been pre-announced, to minimize loss of life. Good local intelligence, and accuracy, were therefore required (pp. 65-67). Actual invasion and occupation, as in the contrasting "ground method," were not required.

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of discovering such confidence to be unprocurable. The very same modern technology that deters a multistage invasion--notably attack by precisely guided weapons that may sink the ships or, failing that, may subsequently destroy the invader's vehicles on the ground and in the air--greatly enhances the effectiveness of attack from a standoff distance. If neither we nor the Soviets can any longer procure high confidence aerospace defense for even our homelands, how can minor powers procure it?*

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But now we must consider Soviet actions in the Persian Gulf, at every stage, as well as actions by fanatical religious elements. Much as I agree with Tucker's analysis, I worry more than he does about posing a "nuclear threat." Thus, I agree with Nitze and Wohlstetter, not Tucker, on this vital point.[†] As Tucker says, "A tripwire policy in the Gulf cannot be expected to carry greater persuasiveness than it does in Europe." Surely it carries much less persuasiveness, given the depth of our historical common commitment to NATO, our complex of bases and related infrastructure, our sizable forces there, a Common Command, and closer proximity to the United States. And, even in NATO, a policy of "flexible response" was not adopted until December, 1967, despite U.S. efforts to secure such a new strategic concept that began early in 1961.** And, because we were weary about the doctrinal debate, and preoccupied with Vietnam, we settled then for an unsatisfactory alliance version of "flexible response." The NATO version was adopted by our allies because, somehow, our "nuclear capabilities" were still to lessen the economic cost of conventional arms in the 1980s as well as the 1960s. That invalid argument is justly criticized

* M. W. Hoag, *U.S. Economic and Security Problems: Why Not Project Interdependence?* California Seminar on Arms Control and Foreign Policy (November, 1975), p. 26.

[†] As expressed in their chapters in *National Security in the 1980s: From Weakness to Strength* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1980).

** *NATO Facts and Figures* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, 1978), p. 279.

by Tucker, who wants to anchor our Middle East defense upon a firm foundation of conventional strength.

Is not our 35 year old tradition against using nuclear weapons so valuable that we should treasure it until and unless forced, by truly compelling circumstances, to break it? And can we possibly claim now to be better able to fight a nuclear war around the Persian Gulf than can the Soviets? Where are our SS-20 missiles, Backfire bombers, and aerospace defenses? If we had listened more to Nitze and Wohlstetter in the 1950s and 1960s, rather than to their critics, we might now have a military posture which would lend essential credibility to Tucker's view.

One can, to be sure, multiply near-endless scenarios about crises in and around the Persian Gulf. But even if we must use force, modern non-nuclear munitions, precisely aimed at enemy "choke points," or economic targeting, may be effective enough in an area where transport facilities are limited. If they are not, would replacement by nuclear attacks, on balance, be a good idea? What would then happen to the Eitam and Etzion bases that Tucker, quite properly, wants to use? The Soviets can easily destroy them.

We do and must maintain a credible nuclear umbrella for our allies, and we are improving it. I have elsewhere criticized Henry Kissinger's technical errors in his famous speech in Brussels on September 1, 1979, which led him to confuse force sizing criteria for our strategic retaliatory forces and force employment criteria, and thus to understate the validity of our nuclear umbrella.* Further, we could be driven to use nuclear weapons in some extreme circumstances in the Middle East, precisely because that invalid argument that "nuclear weapons" save money has been abused. Our conventional capabilities have not been properly maintained for fifteen years, and we must live with the dangerous consequences of their neglect as best we can. We do share with our allies truly global "vital interests" in the Persian Gulf, and the point to stress is that the views held

* M. W. Hoag, *Counterforce, Conventional Arms, and Confusion: A Comment on the Brussels Conference*, The Rand Corporation, P-6485, May, 1980.

in common by Nitze, Tucker, and Wohlstetter should command great assent. They certainly command mine.

After all, Paul Nitze was the main author of the famous NSC-68 Strategic Reassessment of 1950, and that document sought the proper goal of "flexible response"; namely, the attainment of conventional capabilities that would enable us "to attain our objectives without war, or, in the event of war, without recourse to the use of atomic weapons for strategic or tactical purposes."* Are not wise "owls" of the present more likely to come from the ranks of those who have been called the "hawks," rather than from the "doves"?

* NSC-68, as cited in T. H. Etzold and J. L. Gaddis, eds., *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945-1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 418.

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